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The Life of Calvin

1509 - 1564

a man of faith who was zealous for truth

*“I remember that I am not my own.
I offer up my heart a slain victim
for a sacrifice to the Lord.”*

Calvin's Early Years

Paris of 1533 was caught up in a tense, bitter, religious struggle. Here, in a hostile Catholic city, an “underground” evangelical community strove to uphold its testimony in the face of terrible persecution. And in the forefront of the battle there stood as leader and pastor of the suffering church a frail young scholar in his early twenties.

His background and grooming was that of a rich lawyer's son. His academic achievements in law and the sciences had already made an impression on the leaders of learning in France.

His eyes were grave and yet full of feeling. And his face – so very pale against the blackness of his hair – evoked surprise and sympathy. To meet John Calvin even then was to meet an unusual man.

Henry VIII reigned in England, and Cranmer was newly installed as Archbishop of Canterbury. Catholics and Protestants in high places fought desperately for the king's favor.

Raging conflict

In Paris the conflict raged, not in royal palaces, but in the university and in the streets. Those who loved the Lord in the evangelical congregation never knew when their children or goods would be seized, their houses burned, and their lives laid down for the testimony of Jesus Christ. However had the shy, sensitive student from Picardy come to be caught up in this turmoil?

Calvin first set foot in Paris in the year 1521, at the age of twelve, to be schooled for the priesthood. Very

religious, and deeply devoted to the Roman Church, his young mind viewed with abhorrence the actions of Luther, who four years earlier had nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. When he was nineteen (1528), the future priest's father became involved in a bitter quarrel with church dignitaries and took his son away from Paris to study law at Orléans. After this he studied at the University of Bourges.

While at Bourges, Calvin pursued the study of Greek, finding himself under a tutor who held the same view of religion as the notorious Martin Luther. There can be little doubt he employed all his developing skill in legal argument against the heretical views of his tutor.

Wrestling with the Gospels

Then, when one of his cousins renounced his calling as a Franciscan monk to embrace Luther's message, Calvin became determined to investigate, and to resolve these issues once and for all.

He returned to Paris at age twenty-two in 1531, studying further Greek and Hebrew under the foremost humanist scholars. He set himself to demonstrate the errors of the new reformed teaching, and to defend traditional Catholic doctrine. Alongside his already wide studies, he now delved deeply into the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers. Daily he wrestled with the *Gospels* and epistles, discovering more and more the remoteness of his mother church from the striking system of Truth found in God's Word.

In addition, he discovered the Church Fathers to be very different from the men he had imagined. Where in their writings were the opinions and sayings so generally ascribed to them by the Church? If Luther and his friends were so grossly violating the truths uttered by

the Fathers, when did the Fathers say these things, and where?

Inward seeking

Outwardly no one would have dreamed that Calvin had become so unsettled about these things. He was by now a “doctor” of two years standing, and had made such progress in law and the sciences that he was described by leading men of letters as Europe’s most brilliant academician.

Yet inwardly, he was less sure of himself than at any time. Part of him rose angrily to defend the Church of Rome. Part of him went out in sympathy to the misrepresented and maligned Lutherans.

Calvin sought to resolve his problem in the only way he knew – that of arduous study. Alongside preparing for press his first book (a brilliant critical literary work) he continued to evaluate the Catholic and Lutheran positions in the light of the Bible and the Fathers.

Rarely stopping for food, he would read and deliberate into the early hours of the morning. On rising after negligible sleep, he would recite to himself all that his mind had absorbed from the previous day’s study. Gradually, he came to know by heart almost everything of importance that he read.

But even the capacity of a superb memory and the reasoning power of a brilliant mind could not bring a single shaft of light, or dispel his spiritual confusion. Only an act of God could dispel that. He wrote, ‘since I was too obstinately addicted to the superstitions of papacy to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.’ He was twenty-three when the Lord opened his eyes and heart.

Breath-taking suddenness

“Like a flash of light,” he wrote, “I realized what a pit of errors and chaos I was in.” With breath-taking suddenness, he grasped the central truths of the Gospel, and his heart opened to Christ the Savior. Now he fell before God, trusted that on Calvary Christ had born the punishment of his sins, and surrendered up his will and life to Him. “I was immediately inflamed with intense desire to make progress.”

It was of great significance that Calvin came to stay in the house of de la Forge, a wealthy Paris draper who had been converted to God through reading Luther. This fearless man had thrown open his large house to any number of Protestants made homeless by religious persecution. However, not all his guests were entirely sound in their views. In fact, they represented among them a considerable range of extremes and even heresies.

Seeds of the *Institutes*

Calvin found in this house hospitality and spiritual kindness; but he also found that his heart ached over the muddle and misunderstanding which abounded. Once again, into the early hours, the discipline of study was applied to the problems which moved him. Sitting in the great bow-window at the front of the house, Calvin penned with clarity the truths through which he had found life and peace.

The result, ultimately, was the greatest theological work outside the Bible – the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Its pages surely reflect his painstaking efforts to convey, simply and movingly, some semblance of evangelical theology to his fellow guests. Perhaps it is to them and their errors that we owe the seeds of the *Institutes*.

It must have been de la Forge who, impressed with the persuasiveness of Calvin's manner, urged him into service for the "secret" assemblies of the city's evangelical community. We know that he was the most reluctant of preachers. He recoiled from any kind of public work, and yet, as others implored him, he developed an inner compulsion to speak. His efforts began at meetings convened within the university, and in the homes of members, and he speedily came to be received and loved as the leading pastor among Parisian believers.

The hostility with which he and his flock contended, and his own personal courage, were to be demonstrated in countless incidents. The execution of a surgeon named Pointent provides a particularly vivid picture. This converted doctor was often called to treat priests suffering from venereal disease arising from their promiscuity. Pointent lost no opportunity of spelling out the law and the Gospel to such patients. Inevitably, the hatred of the priests led to his being seized and committed to execution for his Protestant views.

Calvin was among the grief-stricken band who witnessed the barbaric cutting out of the surgeon's tongue just before the burning. He made as though to rush forward. He wanted to do something. He wanted to preach. He could not simply look on. But his friends took hold of him and forced him away. They could not afford the untimely loss of their pastor.

Climax of confrontation

It was not long before a way opened for Calvin to strike a telling blow at the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the priests. The University of Paris had elected as rector a man greatly sympathetic to the evangelical position – Nicolas Cop. He happened to be the son of

the king's own physician. Calvin reasoned that if such a man, on some auspicious occasion, were to speak in favor of reformed doctrine, the authorities would not dare to persecute him.

Calvin first persuaded him and then shared with him the work of composing a speech.

The day arrived; a day of rich ceremony, when the university assembled to commence a new session. The royal family and all the city dignitaries and clergy were present. The moment came for the rector to rise and speak. With hushed incredulity the assembly heard the rector movingly assert justification by faith alone. Point after point struck aside the theology of Rome, to exalt the contrasting justification of the Bible.

The speech caused an immediate sensation in the city. Academics launched into fierce argument, attacking or defending their rector. The king's sister sent for Calvin and congratulated him for his part in the speech. But the priests set about securing the rector's arrest. The authorities duly summoned him to appear before them, and he prepared to go, confident that they would not dare to strike at the liberty of expression of the university. However, with the king out of the city they were ready to do just that.

The rector was heading for the encounter when word came that arrest and persecution lay ahead. Students bundled him off down side streets and minutes later he was out of the city escaping to his home town.

Dramatic escape

Calvin, in the meantime, was back at de la Forge's house, secure in the belief that all had passed off as planned. Suddenly students burst in. "Out!" they exclaimed. "Escape for your life!" Even while they gabbled out an account of the rector's flight, armed men appeared at the front of the house. Calvin was

pushed to a back room, and within seconds bed-sheets were knotted together, and he was out of the window, down and away.

In a year he resigned his income and severed all connections with Rome. The one who might so easily have become a lawyer of great wealth, became instead a penniless, persecuted, wandering preacher.

The next two years saw him in a number of cities in France and Italy, writing and preaching. He put further work into his emerging book, the *Institutes*. Then, by the irresistible power of affection, he was compelled to return to his flock in Paris. One by one, secretly, he called on the believers, rich and poor, but his presence became known to the authorities, and once again his friends forced him to flee before the arm of persecution.

Settled in Basel (1535), he quickly completed the *Institutes*, which made him a leader of the Reformation movement. (The first edition was published in 1536.) Even as he put the finishing touches to the work, his heart was torn by the news that his Paris flock was being ravaged by renewed arrests and burnings.

Later, under the terms of a six-month religious “amnesty,” Calvin returned to his people. How few were left! Many had given their lives for the faith. This time there was no warmth of fellowship with his closest friend de la Forge. There was no fervent prayer round the family fireplace. Etienne de la Forge and his family had also laid down their lives for the Truth.

Active Service

Longing for quiet study

With the six months in Paris over, Calvin took once more to the road. He intended to go to Basel, or perhaps further. Paler and more drawn as the time passed, the young man with harrowing days behind him wanted more than anything a secluded spot, where his yearning pen could strike again for the Gospel.

This desire was shaped by his natural inclination for quiet study. But it was intensified by the effect of physical suffering. Calvin, at twenty-six, endured an almost permanent sharp headache, recurring stomach upsets and cramps, and a chest condition which caused him to spit blood for hours after preaching. How he longed for a study, and for peace and time to work.

His route took him through Geneva, a city where he intended to spend just one night. The people of Geneva had recently decided to adopt the principles of the Reformation, but it had been a political decision rather than a spiritual one. After enduring severe famine, the population had lost all trust in the ruling Catholic party, so that the advocates of the Reformation had been able to snatch a momentous victory in city elections. Architect of that victory was the impetuous William Farel.

Farel was unquestionably the roughest diamond of his times. His frame was as tough and hardy as Calvin's was slight and sickly. His appearance was almost startling. Red hair and beard, and fiery eyes projected undisciplined power.

Farel's voice was a roar of emotion. Acclaimed as a preacher, he tore down the facade of Rome, ruthlessly exposing all that lay behind. He was a figure of tremendous stature and popularity. But this "overwhelming" man, with his whiplash wit and voice, well

recognized the limit of his abilities. He had grasped the reins of power from Geneva's priests. But how would he win the people to Christ, or devise a civic code to improve the city? Such endeavors went beyond his gifts. His readiness to see this is evidence of the grace in his heart.

One night Farel was told, almost casually, "Have you heard . . . Calvin is here?"

"*The* Calvin," he replied, "John Calvin who has written the *Institutes*?"

"Yes... he is here, but he is leaving in the morning."

Great hopes

It was more than Farel could have hoped. Calvin was in Geneva. The young scholar from Paris was the one man in his estimation with the intellectual power and pastoral capacity to lead Geneva to the Word of God. If Farel had powers which Calvin lacked, Calvin had all that Farel lacked.

"He is not going!" Farel shouted. "Where is he? Where is he staying?"

Farel was surprised, certainly, when he saw the slighthness of build and sickly pallor of the young Calvin. He must have felt an awful hesitancy. Could such a man stand up to the cruel pressures of Genevan public life? But Farel was a shrewd judge of other men, and he recognized in Calvin the resilience and courage which had upheld him through the turmoils of Parisian persecution.

There was one major obstacle to Calvin remaining in Geneva. He was determined to travel on in search of a place of peace, where he would apply himself to his studies and fight for the Reformation with pen and ink. The conversation between the two men soon became sharp and even hostile. Calvin was tired; exhausted

within by persecution and without by sickness and travel. Farel, fiery eyes alive with passion, was overbearing and determined.

Calvin just could not see that the practical reform of Geneva was the work that he should be doing. Farel, for his part, saw Calvin's desire for study as a miserable abdication of responsibility. His reverence for Calvin was almost matched by mounting contempt for this seeker of peace and quiet.

Calvin held out. He could not and would not be persuaded to stay. At last Farel, his voice shaking with emotion, uttered his curse upon Calvin and his desired haven.

It was as if the young preacher was struck with a force never felt before. Dismayed, he heard, through Farel, the voice of God. All his hopes and aspirations fell from him. Suddenly, they became shabby, unworthy desires. Overwhelmed, he felt that to resist Farel would be to spurn the Lord. And as his mind bowed in consent, a burden for Geneva settled on his heart.

Calvin's service in the city began with his preaching a series of lectures on the Epistle to the Romans in St. Peter's. At first the city Council had a low opinion, but agreed to Farel's request that his services as a teacher be retained. Gradually, however, more and more people gathered to hear his expositions, realizing that in him they had an unusual and compelling preacher.

Calvin astonishes all

A more remarkable manifestation of his powers was soon to be witnessed in Lausanne. There, in the first week of October 1536, the authorities convened a public debate on orders from Bern. The aim was to bring before Lausanne's inhabitants the challenge of the Reformation.

Priests and monks from nearly forty monasteries were invited to participate, as well as the clergy of the principal cathedrals. Altogether, 174 priests and many monks accepted the invitation. All contended in favor of Rome.

The subject to be debated was the teaching of Farel and his fellow reformer, Viret. The great cathedral at Lausanne, crowded to capacity, heard its spokesmen clash with the Swiss reformers. Calvin, shy of such proceedings, was content to listen.

Stung into action

On the fourth day, however, a Roman priest rose to read a scathing speech in which the reformers were accused of slighting the early Church Fathers, and discarding their authority. No sooner had he finished than Calvin was on his feet. Those countless hours spent searching the writings of the Fathers at the time he was seeking spiritual light and life, now bore fruit. Without references or notes, Calvin commended the Fathers. Then, turning on the spokesman of Rome, he charged him with never having read their works. And from those works he presented to that great assembly Protestant doctrine. From his extraordinary memory he recited portions from Augustine, Tertullian, Chrysostom and others. Repeatedly, the teaching of Rome was repudiated from the mouths of the Church Fathers. The ground on which the priests stood fell from beneath them!

For three days prior to Calvin's interruption, arguments and speeches, accusations and denials had echoed through the cathedral, both sides implacably clinging to their position. But Calvin commanded the attention and respect of friend and foe alike. He resumed his seat to a stunned silence. Then, to the astonishment of all, a popular Franciscan preacher rose

to falteringly confess that he had spread false teaching. Publicly he renounced his order and pledged his life to the authority of the Bible alone.

The weeks following saw numerous others turning from Rome to the Word, principally through the influence of that powerful and moving speech in the closing hours of the debate. Calvin's Lausanne intervention firmly established him in the estimation of the Geneva Council, and led to his speedy appointment as Farel's assistant. At once he set about planning a reform program for the worship and teaching of the church. It took the form of a Confession of Faith.

What Calvin now sought to achieve in Geneva cannot be judged by the biblical light of today. The massive foundation of doctrine established by the reformers has led to the subsequent emergence of further biblical standards, especially the distinction between church and state. We now live in a climate in which the freedom of churches to order their own spiritual affairs independently of the state has operated for generations.

In Geneva, Calvin longed to bring the church back to the practices of the early centuries. He wanted to see a disciplined, spiritual church. But to him, at that time, the only way of achieving this was by the authority of the state. The church, in his mind, did not have authority to detach herself from the state and order her own affairs. It is true that others at that time were already maintaining that church and state were separate. But for most in the Reformation tradition this conviction was at least half a century away.

Church and state

Calvin saw Geneva as a place where church and state would walk together. Certainly, the state would have no final authority over the spiritual direction of the church. But the state through its Council and mag-

istrates would be the servant of the church, and would enforce the discipline and laws desired by the church.

Calvin's magnificent exposition of Scripture, published for posterity, has formed the basis of all subsequent Bible interpretation. His efforts to reform the church provided the impetus for advance throughout Europe. The magnitude of his achievements, by the grace of God, cannot be overstated. But his views on the relationship of church and state were to bring him great distress.

Expansion of Ministry

Honeymoon period

In 1536 Farel took Calvin's scheme for city reform before the Council, who approved. With the law on the side of the church, the preachers began to apply it stringently against all forms of vice and lawlessness within the city. At first the effect was extraordinary. From the city Council down to the common people, a new morale appeared. Secret antagonism was content to lurk in the shadows. As far as open public opinion was concerned, there was overwhelming enthusiasm from the people.

Various writers have explained this in different ways. It was perhaps the "honeymoon period" of a new relationship between church and state. It was the novelty factor. It was, perhaps, largely due to the people being surprised and deeply impressed by the character of Calvin's public teaching. It was, perhaps, that the city gained a new sense of independence and uniqueness. Where else were such things happening?

Others have suggested a less wholesome reason. Was it that the people were enjoying the scandal and

drama of public figures falling from their eminence, and wealthy merchants facing public humiliation? After all, the city Council and preachers were rooting out offenders from all levels of society. One prominent councilor was locked in the pillory with playing-cards hung round his neck for operating a gambling club. Another suffered humiliation for producing a theatrical performance.

Public support of the preachers extended to the daily services, which by now overflowed continuously. However, affairs would soon show how temporary apparently spiritual interest can be.

The great reaction

Calvin and Farel both felt that their reforms needed lasting security. They were doubtful about the stability of laws introduced only by the will of a changing body of councilors. They decided to demand that every citizen in Geneva should swear his or her allegiance to the Confession of Faith. Overnight the mood of the population changed. The spell of enthusiasm was broken. The reforming heroes became enemies of the people.

The Council tried to force citizens to take the oath by threatening exile, but it was no use. Suddenly, all silent opposition to the preachers found cause for expression. All sections of the community refused to affirm the Confession, including convinced Protestants who saw it as a new form of popery. A public protest meeting was called at which speakers hit out at French domination and “captivity of the spirit”.

This triggered revulsion towards the preachers and their intrusion into civic affairs. The delight of the public at seeing public figures reprimanded changed swiftly to open mocking of the spiritual regime. Those who stood behind Calvin and Farel found themselves insulted and slighted. Songs with derisive and obscene

sentiments were written against them. These would be sung after dark beneath the windows of the reformers' houses.

The city Council proved susceptible to this campaign of scorn and ridicule. Within a year the majority were expressing opinions against the preachers, and four new councilors hostile to them were elected.

Somehow, Calvin and Farel persuaded the Council to act to prevent the city plunging into anarchy. A proclamation was issued. "Disorder and nightly rowdyism is overtaking us . . . we command that no insulting songs be sung naming any citizens living in Geneva. Further, no one is permitted on the streets after 9 PM without a lantern, and everyone is to abstain from shouting and voices raised in argument. All such things will be punished by imprisonment and rations of bread and water . . ."

As it happened, this proclamation became the last straw. Never before had the public had such threats held over them. How much more did the preachers intend to interfere with their private lives? To tell them what they may or may not sing in their drunken hours was surely a sign of worse to come.

Reversals

Soon, another issue intervened to fan further the flames of opposition. The authorities at Bern sent directives to Geneva to repeal some of the rules introduced by the preachers. For example, Bern demanded that Geneva should go back to using wafers at the Lord's Supper. Calvin and Farel felt that no secular power should decide church matters, and held their ground. Strangely, the city's population developed a craving for the wafer and a near hysterical sense of deprivation became widespread. Another orchestrated program of derision was mounted against the preach-

ers, who retaliated by preaching against the people and even against the Council.

The climax of disorder came when the Council ordered that the Lord's Supper should be observed at the approaching Easter. Calvin and Farel were deeply disturbed. How could they officiate at the Lord's Table, admitting all and sundry, in the midst of such disorder? They refused to hold the services. Consequently the Council judged the preachers to be disorderly, and barred them from the pulpits.

The preachers ignored the measure. But the general population, discerning the developing anti-Reformation mood of the Council, began a program of personal intimidation of Calvin, Farel and other preachers.

Mobs banged incessantly on the doors of their houses, and musket shots were fired at their walls. Calvin went on preaching. Finally, during a sermon given in the old Franciscan church, mob violence broke out in the pews.

It was too much. The city Council ordered Calvin and Farel to leave the city within twenty-four hours. They were to be exiled. So it was that the two men, with the outspoken blind preacher Courault, walked sadly out of the city gates, spurned by the people of Geneva.

Perhaps the finest period of Calvin's life was that spent in "exile" at Strasbourg following his eviction. Relieved of the pressures of political and public life, he applied himself wholly for three years to teaching, preaching, writing and counseling. He was quickly invited to pastor a French Reformed congregation in the city, and also taught in the university. Commentaries flowed from his ever-busy pen. Romans appeared, along with the Gospel of John and the Corinthian epis-

tles. He also produced a much enlarged edition of the *Institutes* in 1539.

Constantly, a stream of callers came to Strasbourg to observe his methods and to seek advice.

With mixed feelings, at thirty-two years of age, he was persuaded to go back to Geneva. In 1540 the city sent a deputation appealing for his return. Part of him was very reluctant. At length he wrote, "I remember that I am not my own. I offer up my heart a slain victim for a sacrifice to the Lord . . . I submit my will and my affections . . . to the obedience of God." He was welcomed in 1541 with great enthusiasm and installed in a large house commanding a dramatic view of the lake. He then embarked on nearly fifteen years of intense struggle to lift the moral standards of Geneva.

Many ailments

Physically, Calvin was hardly a fit man for such a task. He suffered from sleeplessness, chest complaints, repeated fevers, cramps across the stomach, bilious upsets, a stomach ulcer, unrelenting head pain, frequent kidney stones, and that painful condition which caused him to spit blood after preaching. His frame was already emaciated and he acknowledged his health to be a "living-death struggle".

As biographers stress, his personal sufferings were not limited to his own health. During his stay in Strasbourg he had married a young widow Idelette de Bure (whose husband he himself had buried some time before). But his wife also was of delicate health. They had only nine years together before sickness carried her from him. Three children she bore him all died while small.

Despite his troubles, Calvin held to his objective. His first task in Geneva was to draft new rules for the conduct of the church. His first battle with the city

Council came over the frequency of the Communion. He wanted a Communion every month, but the Council reduced it to four times a year.

Reformation of offices

The new constitution of the Genevan church provided for several classes of officer: preachers, doctors, teachers, elders and deacons. Every week the preachers and elders would meet to take oversight of church affairs, including matters of discipline. Teachers held classes, instructed the youth and catechized younger children. Deacons had responsibility for the monetary offerings, church buildings, almsgiving and the functioning of the church's hospital and infirmary.

Despite the unhappy problems arising from the tangled relationship of church and city Council, and despite the futility of treating countless citizens as church members, the pattern of church government adopted in Geneva was a considerable advance. A serious attempt was made to establish many of the practices, officers and standards found in the New Testament.

Hindrances were many. Most of Calvin's fellow preachers do not seem to have been particularly able or earnest. When plague struck the city in 1543, the Council had great difficulty persuading any preacher apart from Calvin and Pastor Blanchet to undertake the chaplaincy care of the sick.

A further hindrance stemmed from an unfortunate appointment made by Calvin. He set over the college a young scholar who became argumentative, awkward, and eventually betrayed his trust completely.

The greatest hindrance of all, however, was the one which had led to the collapse of Calvin's first mission in Geneva. It was the indignation of ordinary people at the strict standards of church discipline. Not

surprisingly, as nearly all the people in the city were full members of the church regardless of whether they could testify to a saving experience, these standards of morality and conduct were seen to be unreasonable.

Efforts to Christianize Geneva's life by the processes of church discipline generally failed. But the preaching ministry of Calvin and his students was mightily used by God to the blessing of very many. Daily sermons and classes brought hungry listeners in great crowds. The city Council recorded that a "multitude of people" attended the sermons of Calvin and Viret. They did not go as the result of iron discipline, but through desire. An intensely pastoral man, Calvin's sermons were often almost conversational. He presupposed that perplexed hearts would be present, and prepared to give an "intimate" word to them.

A continuing stream of published commentaries and essays went out across Europe. Whatever the problems in Calvin's "Christian City", it had become the principal center for ministry and Reformation.

Burning of Servetus

Almost fourteen years after Calvin's return to Geneva, a Spaniard entered Geneva whose name was to cast an immense shadow over the reformer's memory. He was Michael Servetus.

Servetus had come into conflict with Calvin some twenty years previously. He became a physician, but continued to be absorbed by theological debate. It was on account of his strange views that he had to flee from Vienna where he held the post of physician to the Catholic archbishop.

Servetus then went to Geneva, regarded as a heretic by Romanists and reformers alike. Did he expect sympathy and sanctuary? More likely he hoped to in-

stall himself among the disgruntled anti-Calvin element in Geneva.

The moment Servetus was known to have entered the city, Calvin insisted on his arrest. Ultimately, Servetus would be executed. Biographers friendly to Calvin usually plead for “perspective.” They point out that Calvin lived in days when Catholics and Protestants all believed in the execution of heretics. Large-scale executions of Protestants by Rome occurred all the time. These actions, it is argued, went unquestioned. We are exhorted not to judge Calvin by the emancipated standards which came on the scene later.

These sympathetic writers say that Calvin was not himself responsible for the order to burn Servetus. That lay with the city Council. They note that Calvin made a plea for clemency. They portray him as the agonized pastor, unable to avert the horror of execution.

Causative forces

Geneva was certainly not a free society in which people could hold whatever views they chose, accountable to God alone. Furthermore, the reformers saw a heretic in terms of the damage he might do. It was not so much a vindictive reaction against anyone who did not agree with them, as a passionate desire to protect the souls of others from the poison of error.

Calvin certainly favored executing Servetus. This is proved by his written statement of some years before, that if ever Servetus came to Geneva while he had influence, he would not leave the city alive.

The situation was considerably aggravated by the rudeness and arrogance of Servetus. Such was his brazen and insulting behavior following arrest, that it seems certain that he expected release. It was plain that he had come to Geneva not just for sanctuary, but with a mission to topple and destroy Calvin.

He seems to have thought the reformer's position in Geneva was so precarious that this trial would provoke uproar and lead to Calvin's second rejection.

Because Servetus was determined to ruin Calvin and the Reformation, he made it necessary for the reformers to oppose him utterly. Servetus chose the collision course.

The trial itself vindicates to a degree the character of Calvin. Servetus entered a defense so abrasive and insulting as to be without parallel in the affairs of the city. Calvin found himself dragged daily through a mire of insults. Yet, for the most part, he maintained patience and dignity. Eventually the Council passed the sentence of death. Servetus was amazed. He clearly had not expected this and broke emotionally.

As for Calvin, he himself suffered a sentence in the court of public opinion. He wrote to friends, "Whatever slander they can invent is being hurled at me. Actually the unfriendly ones and the critical in our own camp attack one more fiercely than the acknowledged foes in the papal company..."

Certainly, the execution of Servetus should be viewed in the context of the accepted conduct of those times. Nevertheless, Calvin cannot be justified from the Word of God. One may only say that had he been free from his notion of church and state interdependence, it might never have happened.

When the next city election took place, counselors favorable to Calvin and the Reformation were returned in greater numbers. But further troubles were on hand from the stream of refugees pouring into the city. Geneva was a haven for persecuted evangelicals fleeing from Catholic France. Hungry and destitute, families arrived continually at the gates of this doctrinal sanctuary.

City of foreigners

The restive population soon focused on whether the newcomers should have right of citizenship. Calvin's opponents said no, partly because each newcomer fervently supported the Reformation. Even citizens friendly to Calvin felt unhappy. Geneva was becoming a city of foreigners.

With the naturalization of so many newcomers, the opposition resorted to violence. A wild attempt was launched to murder hundreds of newcomers overnight, while they slept, and make it look as though the refugees had themselves started an insurrection. The authorities heard rumors of the plan and alerted the city guard. The Genevan plotters were rounded up, and their leaders tried and beheaded.

City of peace

For nine further years Calvin was to enjoy peaceful leadership. Trials, pains, and humiliations were virtually at an end. From now on his conflicts would be with opponents in the outside world. Twenty years of conflict at last secured for the reformers nine years of unchallenged influence over the fourteen thousand inhabitants. He founded his university and through it made the greatest contribution to the provision of a trained ministry in Europe. According to the Register of the Company of Pastors in Geneva, the city also sent out "missionary" preachers to France and Piedmont, often to meet persecution and martyrdom.

For the last five years of his life Calvin knew that his time was limited. On Christmas Day in 1559 he was seized by coughing and spitting of blood to an unusual extent. Tuberculosis followed its inevitable course towards death. Early in 1564 he preached his last sermon and was forced to his bed. At Easter he was carried to join his flock at the Lord's Table, singing with them

the words, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

Not long afterwards he asked for the City Council to gather round his bed. He was clearly dying. His face was white and drawn, yet his eyes still shone with feeling. His hands, almost bones, stretched out towards the men who ruled, as he slowly, tortuously uttered his last exhortation.

Beza, Calvin’s first disciple and spiritual successor, attended him to the end, which came on May 27, 1564. “It has pleased God,” he said, “to show us in the life of this one man of our time both how to live and how to die.”

So passed from the earthly scene one who left almost nothing in the way of material possessions – but who left to posterity the greatest legacy of Christian literature of any man. God had mightily used him as evangelist, pastor, reformer, theologian, and had made him the Prince of Expositors.



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